

Leaf Curl

He held the blighted leaf in his hand. Its lifeless veins crisp and brittle, it shattered into a half a dozen pieces and then crumbled into dust between his thumb and fingers, falling into the earth like a quiet snowfall in the dark, silently yielding to the forces of life and death.

“Leaf curl,” Don had said. “Caused by a virus carried to the host by parasitic insects. Nothing you can do about it except hope it don’t spread.”

Host. It seemed like such a peculiar term to use, inferring as it did a willingness, an invitation and a welcoming. It was the fourth tomato plant to die, its immature fruit now ripening into dwarfed bearers of seed in a race to fulfill its worldly journey.

Jareb wrenched the plant from the soil and tossed it on the growing pile of abandoned plants, discarded and forgotten in hopes of salvaging the survivors, which were now one: a Thessaloniki whose sprouting arms, burdened with enough rich red fruit to fill a basket, reached out beyond the confines of its cage groping toward unknown corners of the garden which had been invaded by nightshade, button weed and thistle. The garden was not well tended.

It was the result of forces which propelled the tender far beyond this patch of earth from which tomatoes and cucumbers and corn sprouted like snakes charmed by the music of sunlight and warmth. It doesn’t take much

to start life; just the spreading of seed in the earth's damp darkness. But a well ordered garden that flourishes requires real care: a daily ritual of cultivating, thinning, fertilizing and watering. Just as an orchestra without the direction of its conductor produces a cacophony, a garden without its tender becomes a discordant jumble of growth, weeds twisted sinisterly around the stalks and leaves of the chosen plants.

But there was nothing to be done. The seed had been placed in the earth in the spring when Jareb had hope of remaining at home with Bernice. The promise of a job in the Valley working on the interstate bridge seemed so possible at the time. He and Bernice would lie awake clinging to each other, neither betraying their exhaustion from the months, now years, of holding on to hope to the other, and talk about the possibility of the job. It had been years since he had worked for anyone, been an employee. He was strong and smart in his own way. He had a good work ethic and was a natural leader of men, so the contracting business he started so many years ago, with them clinging then, too, but in a joyful way, discussing the possibilities, had been good to them. Gradually over the years he had accumulated tools and trucks and accounts, and men, good men who gave an honest day's work and always looked after Jareb's interests because they knew it was their interest, too. But then the crash came, a recession they called it, but it wasn't like the other recessions where they had to tighten their belts and do without so they could pay the men who worked so hard for them, who *were* the company, really, (where would they be without them?) and keep things going so that when things turned for the better, and they always did, they'd still be there, the equipment and the men and of course the accounts that kept them busy, that paid the bills; no it wasn't like that at all this time and one by one Jareb had to lay off each of the men,

until they were all gone, and sell the tools and equipment, keeping just enough so that he could work alone, just him, until there wasn't any work.

And then one day he came home smiling, Bernice couldn't remember the last time she had seen him smile, and told her with his voice full of excitement about the new bridge they were building over the interstate and how Karl, who had worked for Jareb for years, Karl the last one to go because he was the best, had gotten a job building the bridge because the carpenter foreman was his cousin and he was sure that he could get Jareb a job there, too.

It was strange for them at first, to think of Jareb working alongside Karl as a carpenter for wages when for more than ten years he had been the boss who paid Karl's wages. But when Jareb told Bernice what Karl brought home on his paycheck it didn't seem so strange after all, because twenty-six dollars an hour was a thousand dollars a week more than he had made for the last ten months and they'd be able to pay against the mortgage and maybe keep the house now; all he needed was for Karl to put in the good word and why wouldn't he? No one in the valley was a harder worker than Jareb. And so their spring was filled with hope and Jareb had planted the garden.

Jareb picked a tomato, one of the smaller ones, and ate it like an apple. Its tart juicy flesh pleased him, and he imagined himself carrying a basket full of them to Bernice's kitchen where she would fuss over them, and him, before making spaghetti and salsa and salads.

In May Karl called him and told him that everything was all set, the job was his; all he had to do was sign up at the union hall. There'd be no problem, Karl told him; with his experience and reputation the union would

gladly take him in. But there was a problem, and that night as Jareb held Bernice in his arms he told her.

“They want me to join the union,” he said.

Bernice looked at him wondering. It was a job, after all.

“I believe in a man’s right to work,” Karl explained. “I always paid my men well, took care of them, but no one ever told me how to run my business. That’s what unions do. They take a man’s ability to control his business away from him and they’ve ruined the work ethic in this country.”

“You’re going to take the job aren’t you?” Bernice asked.

“A man has to be true to his beliefs.” Jareb invoked the words that he had always spoken when important decisions were to be made, often in the dark lying next to Bernice when they sought the resolution they needed for sleep. It was a wisdom that had been passed down from one generation to the next by his forebears; it had always served him well.

Bernice remained in his arms, but he felt her cold receding.

“How are we going to get by?” she whispered.

“I’ve always provided for us, and I always will.”

“What if one of us gets sick?” she whispered again.

It was unlike her to question him, not just once, but twice. Jareb lay in the dark somewhat alone, feeling Bernice’s distance in spite of their touching, and for the first time in all their years together he felt disappointment in her. She should cleave unto me, he thought, rigid and silent in the bed.

“Put your trust in the Lord,” he told her gently, as he would to a child. But he could sense that she was not comforted by his words, and as he released her from his embrace she rolled over to face the wall.

She lay silently awake. Her arm was folded under her, her left hand resting against her breast. She could not feel the lump. Perhaps it was nothing more than her imagination, that morning drying herself after her shower when she first noticed the small hard spot on the bottom of her breast. She couldn't even remember feeling it now, not really. Jareb was right. Too often she succumbed to morbid thoughts, finding darkness where there was light. She needed to put her faith in the Lord. Hadn't He always provided a path for them? She began to repeat the prayer that she had said every night that she could remember, the prayer that she had learned from her mother when she was still a baby just learning to talk.

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
Thy angels watch me through the night,
And keep me safe till morning's light.*

Bernice especially liked the part about the angels, and as she had every night of her life, she imagined them hovering over her, could see through her closed eyes the flicker of their fairy light and the flutter of their wings no bigger than a humming bird, and then the sand was in her eyes and she fell into sleep.

Jareb pulled his Dodge Ram 4x4 into the parking lot at the Good News Bible Church. In better times Wednesday evening services had been informally attended, mostly by widows and the overly devout, but now the pews were filled with parishioners girding their faith in the midst of trying circumstances. It was the music he liked most, the praising of the Lord

through song when he could let the spirit of the Lord move him. His body unrestrained by convention and duty, he would dance in an awkward, almost spastic, kind of movement, so filled was he with the spirit, sometimes even writhing on the floor and speaking in tongues. Afterwards he always felt renewed and filled with God's Grace.

There had been times in the past year when he had doubts. Although he would never betray such thoughts, not even to Bernice, he found himself slipping more and more into worry, forgetting that he was a child of God and that he rests in His arms. He found himself going to church more often (even as he was able to tithe less, if at all), not just on Sundays as he always had, but on Wednesdays and Saturdays, too, for it was there that he felt God's comforting presence reminding him that all would be well.

After the service Pastor Wright asked Jareb to meet with him. Jareb followed him down the hall into his office, a pale yellow room lit with fluorescent lights that flickered and hummed, sat in the square oak chair opposite Pastor Wright's gray metal desk decorated with pictures of his amply figured wife and four children.

"Brother Jareb, God's love is strong. When we put our faith in Him we put our lives in the cradle of forgiveness and love and all things become possible."

"Amen, Pastor," Jareb was quick to say. He felt a tinge of apprehension that Pastor Wright had discerned the fear and doubt with which he was struggling and words of praise and thanks for God's glory mounted in his mind; he was prepared to assure the pastor of the strength of his faith. But if it was about his dwindling tithings, there was nothing he could do. Surely, Jareb thought, the church would be as merciful as his Lord.

“I want you to know, Brother Jareb, that I have been praying for your deliverance from the trials you are facing. I know that your faith is strong, and I appreciate that when you have had the means you have been one of God’s most devout servants. These are difficult times for us all, but the will of God can not be denied and, praise God, our prayers have not gone unanswered. Yesterday I met with a remarkable man named Robert Flickman. As a young man he had the calling and became a pastor. The call of the Lord was strong and led Robert into the development of Christian centers: nursing homes, apartment complexes and retirement communities all dedicated to the furtherance of the Glory of God. It is our good fortune that Mr. Flickman has invited us to participate in his latest ministry, a retirement community in Nevada where people of faith can congregate together and enjoy the fruits of their life’s labor in the spirit of the Lord. I took the liberty of mentioning your name and asked him if he would need a man of your skills. He was much interested in what I had to say about you, Bother Jareb, and he would like to meet with you tomorrow morning.”

That night Bernice lay in Jareb’s arms and rested in the comfort of his strength. She had given in to fear and doubt; she had allowed the darkness to overtake the light. She was weak but his faith was strong. He was right, of course: a man has to be true to his beliefs. She must put her faith in the Lord, as Jareb did. She was so overcome by the desire to be filled by Jareb’s goodness that, for the first time in months, she willingly opened her arms to him.

Jareb went once more to Pastor Wright’s office to meet with Mr. Flickman, who was much younger than Jareb had expected, not much more than thirty-five, with carefully placed spiked hair in the fashion that he had seen on teenagers at the mall and his shirt open well down his chest,

displaying the gold chain around his neck with the name “Bobby” where the cross should have been.

“Brother Jareb, I am glad you could make it. I was just singing your praises to Mr. Flickman.”

Flickman rose to greet Jareb, the directness and composure of his perfect toothed smile camouflaging grey eyes, calculating and certain; the manicured strong grip extending from a body builder’s arm greeted Jareb’s thick fingered hand, strong sinewy forearms the result of generations of labor in the paddock, prairie and woods. It was the baron and the crofter, the latter knowing the value of his skills to the former, certain in his competence in the physical world, the others’ knowledge of finance and business a mysterious birthright beyond his realm. The important words were spoken: recognition of Jareb’s skills and devotion, the importance of the ministry and the church, the sanctity of the project, so perfectly spoken it resembled the sermons Jareb had heard all his life in this very building. He set aside the manicure, the carefully spiked hair, the necklace; he was reassured.

Plans were rolled out on the pastor’s desk; there was a general discussion of footage prices and scheduling. Flickman made it clear that he needed some one to run the job, Jareb said he was interested in the framing and finish contracts; if he got those they could work something out on the management end.

“The job should be permitted in two weeks. How soon can you get me pricing?” Flickman asked.

“I’ll have it for you Monday,” Jareb responded.

“That’ll be good. Just remember that there isn’t much in the budget, so sharpen your pencil. And remember, this is God’s work. Leave some money for Him.”

The cool morning air carrying the fragrance of fresh cut grass lapped on Jareb’s skin. Coffee cup and newspaper in hand he closed the patio door behind him and looked across the fairway to Cletus’ house which was not quite finished with sheets still hung in the windows three years after he and Earline had moved in. Some were red, some were white, and others were orange and brown. Jareb tried to see some pattern in their color, some hint of symmetry and order. He did this almost every morning, sitting with his coffee and paper, trying to make some sense of his surroundings. It was a huge stucco house with a tile roof and hued beam pergola that passersby mistook for the clubhouse, set as it was by itself next to the road, surrounded by vacant lots. Cletus was gone, working in Oregon for the past two years. Their children had grown and moved on. It was just Earline alone in the house now. Jareb imagined her moving from room to room with no one to cook for, no one to share a story with, or to praise, to tell a secret to; he could see her, unable to fill the space, dependent on others to provide the structure of her life, she was all restless undirected energy. Without enough self discipline even to make some curtains, Jareb imagined her settling in front of the television, its blue light casting a glow of despair swallowed by the dark night.

Bernice was different. When he was away she would stay busy volunteering at the church and school, taking care of the grandkids. In the evenings she’d keep herself busy with embroidery and cleaning and her Bible studies. Perhaps Bernice and Earline would spend time together, he

thought. Bernice could help sew the curtains and bring some order to the neighborhood. She was good at sewing and it would cheer them both. Jareb made a note to suggest this to Bernice before he left. It would do Earline good to have Bernice for an example.

He heard the clang of a coffee cup on the counter and looking in saw Bernice shuffling in her slippers and robe, getting out the frying pan and eggs. His truck and trailer were loaded. If he left by eight he'd be in Fallon by one o'clock with the time change. That would give him time to get set up in the Bonanza Inn and Casino RV Park and then tour the jobsite, maybe open some accounts in town.

"Morning," he said going back into the house to refill his cup.

"Are you sure you've got everything packed? I don't want to have to drive a drill or a saw to Jordan Valley because you remembered it half way to Nevada," the abruptness of Bernice's tone betrayed her distress.

"I've got everything," Jareb reassured her.

He ate his eggs and toast at the table while Bernice cleaned and scrubbed. As soon as the last bite was off the plate she had it cleared from the table and in the dishwasher. It was her way when life unfolded unpredictably to hide her feelings in housework. It was an awkward good-bye, neither wanting to acknowledge the parting. Jareb moved to embrace Bernice but she turned away. Suddenly spotting some unwanted clutter on the table next to the door, she became immersed in straightening and fixing.

"Call me when you get there so I know you're safe," she said, looking into a drawer.

Jareb stood a moment, feeling the burden of his life spilling into Bernice's. It seemed a mystery to him that a woman willingly suffers a man's fate. Knowing her nature he was assured that Bernice had submitted

to him from her heart; she was a good and true wife, yet he could not help feel a longing for her to embrace him at that moment.

“I thought maybe you could spend some time with Earline, help her sew the curtains,” he offered, not knowing how else to comfort her.

Then her eyes met his, the spark of resentment in them as they stood silently for a moment at the door. He saw the deep wrinkles around her mouth, the creases across her forehead and the extra flesh below her chin. The moment seemed to last as long as he had known her, carrying all of his consciousness from their first embrace in the back seat of his grandmother’s Studebaker until the present moment. He could smell the muskiness of the car’s upholstery mixed with the perfumed scent that filled his senses as he first lifted her skirt and stroked her nylon covered thigh. He saw their first born, Joshua spilling out between her legs and felt every longing he had ever felt for her soft flesh. They had come so far and here they were again at the beginning. He was just as unknowing and determined as he had been in the Studebaker. He turned and stepped up into the truck, turned the key and the rumble of the diesel covered the words he could see she was speaking as he backed out of the driveway.

The long climb out of the Snake River valley held Jareb’s interest, but from the Basque town of Jordan Valley on the road was numbingly unchanging and his mind wandered to the job ahead: his chores at the Bonanza Inn and Casino; the meeting he had scheduled with the electrical contractor to set up temporary power. He’d have to call the locator so the excavator could get started. By the time the job was permitted he hoped to have some footings dug and forms ready to pour. He barely noticed the long-abandoned service station at Burns Junction, chilling in its desolate surroundings, or the ranches spread out sporadically in the hay fields to the

west. There must be water there somewhere, he had thought, but he didn't see any sign of it other than the distant meadows suspended like a mirage in the parched landscape. To the east stark treeless mountains rose, their flanks covered with mountain sagebrush and an occasional dwarf juniper protruding from the black barren earth.

At one point a road, just two tracks in the earth leading through a saddle into the mountains, intersected the highway. *Big Antelope Canyon, 64 miles* the sign said. Jareb felt the bigness of the landscape. It was a place where men headed up tracks for sixty-four miles without another soul around, where ranchers managed the land and water and cattle, only encountering their neighbors on a Sunday or at the store in Winnemucca or Ontario stocking up on goods. Every ranch house, every road into the mountains, was a sign of a man who could stand on his own two feet. It was a landscape where a man could get a measure of himself.

Driving through the desert Jareb began to come back to life. He could almost smell the pungent odor of concrete; hear its gravelly slide down the chute into the forms, feel it on his skin. There would be the purposeful movement of men with mags and floats, a cigarette flung aside and orders shouted, and it would all be under his direction. The footings, the walls, the backfill; plumbing and electrical would be installed, inspected and buried, a slab poured and lumber delivered. Jareb went through the project from beginning to end, rehearsing every detail.

He passed through McDermitt on the Nevada border, a broken down outpost with slot machines and an ancient hotel, a relic of some promised past. Then it was lunch at McDonald's and gas in Winnemucca, and on through Lovelock and the turn off the interstate to Fallon.

The mostly empty Bonanza Inn and Casino RV Park was a large paved area devoid of grass or trees, or any other sign of life beyond the electrical poles and sewer and water pipes spaced between faded lines painted on the crumbled and cracked asphalt surface demarking the boundaries of temporary domains inhabited by anonymous souls on the move to and from points unknown and unimportant, hidden inside their RV's and fifth wheels drinking whiskey and watching television while they waited for their next cheap meal at the casino. Home, in other words. Jareb backed his trailer into the spot furthest from the casino, away from the others, and after releasing the trailer from his truck set about hooking up the electricity, water and sewer.

The jobsite was just a few minutes north of downtown. It was a ten acre alfalfa field that hadn't been farmed for several years, pushed up against the alkali desert. He rolled the plans out on the hood of his truck and got his bearings. Two jets flew low overhead followed a few minutes later by two more, then even more. It was a steady procession like a spray of bullets in the sky, their startling roar quickening his pulse each time they flew by. When the electrician arrived he asked him about the jets and learned about the naval air base on the southern end of town.

"We're in perfect alignment with their runway," he said. "Better get used to it. Probably got the land dirt cheap."

The gold Hummer pulled to a stop outside the job shack, its chrome rims still spinning as Flickman slid out of his seat. His neatly pressed slacks and shirt carried a pungent, earthy aroma and his manner was almost too relaxed and casual as he greeted Jareb.

"You live in Reno?" Jareb asked.

“No, Roseville. It’s just three hours over the pass.” Flickman replied. As they walked into the job shack he got out some paper work, a contract that had to be signed.

“My word is my bond,” Jareb said.

“I know, and I trust you,” said Flickman, “but the bank requires copies of signed contracts from all of the subcontractors. It’s just a formality that I need to get financing.”

Jareb leafed through the twenty pages of print. Usually Bernice read the paperwork, telling him what he needed to know.

“It just says that if you do your job, you’ll get paid. It’s the usual stuff.”

Jareb thought about their first meeting in Pastor Wright’s office. He remembered the pastor’s words about the importance of the ministry. This wasn’t just another construction project; he was doing God’s work and he would be rewarded.

“Where do I sign?” he asked.

Jareb moved further into the garden’s tangled growth where the corn patch supported vines of zucchini and cucumbers whose fruit was in various stages of development, including overripe and decayed, interwoven with the poisonous nightshade and its tempting berries. The corn, once just a kernel cast into the soil, seemed unfettered by its surroundings. The eight foot tall stalks were crowned by tassels as regal as a palace guard’s helmet. Jareb broke off an ear and pulled back the leaves and silk. The ear was bad; its dimpled dry kernels had been invaded by a large brown ear worm soon to become a moth. Jareb walked the row hoping to find one good ear so that he could taste the sugary yellow crunch, juices flowing from his chin wiped with a sleeve, and just for a moment close his eyes and feel the warmth of

the sun on his shoulder and savor the sweetness of the season. This time of year was made for celebrating a summer of work: buildings built, the fruit of the harvest, the fullness of the light; earth's bounty.

His mind drifted back to the Studebaker. An October night, harvest moon, winning touchdown, a night of slow dances at the school; all of the components for romance were in place. He was a senior and Bernice was a sophomore, the prettiest girl in Homedale High. His parents had given him the keys to the old Studebaker they'd stored in the barn for years.

"I don't think Grandma'll be driving anymore, Son. I guess from now on the car is yours," his father said. "Have some fun tonight. Just don't do anything I wouldn't do," he winked.

He took her to Jump Creek where the team was celebrating. They sat around the bonfire, passing the shared bottle on without sipping, and when he put his arm around her she turned and smiled and he kissed her cheek. She had a curfew, so they left early and she slid in next to him and rested her hand gently on his thigh. He stopped along the river in a quiet place hidden from the highway by the cottonwoods and willows and held her hand as they moved into the back seat.

"Just to kiss," she'd said.

Standing in the garden, feeling as forlorn as one of the drooping Sunflowers, Jareb closed his eyes and remembered the first time he cupped Bernice's breast in his hand and felt the unremitting urge pulse through his body as he caressed her nipple. He didn't know then that it would be almost thirty years before they would spend another day without the comfort of each other; that her flesh, a compelling passion in the Studebaker, would become his greatest comfort: the turn of her cheek, the curl of her lip, her tender eye, and her breasts, her breasts.

Angrily he tore at the malignant growth of weeds suffocating his garden. He ripped and tugged at them, cursed and berated them. He'd put his patch in order, by God, he yelled. He worked with a fury, the sweat dripping off of him, his shirt stained with it. He worked the hoe with a vengeance, hacking and clawing at the stubborn roots of the scourge; and when the hoe yielded to the implacable foe he took up the shovel. He was a wild man, slashing and mutilating as he shouted and cursed. The neighbors ran to their windows and locked their doors to keep the delirium out. But then he tired, falling to his knees with his hands at his cheeks, as if in prayer, and his neighbors went on about their business.

Within a month of arriving in Fallon Jareb had the site cleared and graded, three foundations poured and one roughed in, ready to backfill. He'd pour his first slab in a few days. It'd be ready to snap lines and start framing. The trucks from California, Idaho and Alberta, loaded with plate material, studs, header stock, joists and sheathing were already rolling in, two a day. Clay, the only hand left from his crew, was running the fork lift delivered from Reno, unloading and sorting the lumber. Jareb had put a sign out by the road, *Good Framers Wanted*, and put an ad in the local paper to no avail.

He called the lumber yards in Reno pleading for them to send him men, good men, who might be out of work. And they came. Men who hadn't found a day's work for months, evicted from their homes, families lost, eyes receding deeper within their sockets with each setback showed up on the job shack steps after making the hour long drive from Reno because this is where hope was that day. Jareb sorted through the notes he had written to help him remember each man's story, often with one or two words at the

top, a cursory summation of a life. “Beat down,” “Smoker” and “Bragger” were cast into the waste. Ten men who looked fit and still had the light of resolve in their eye, men who had some family to anchor them, were selected.

The first of them would show up Monday to help Clay snap the lines and cut plates. In two weeks he’d have a full crew, eleven counting Clay and with payroll, equipment rental, fuel and supplies he figured he’d be burning through more than ten thousand a week. In the evenings at the RV Park, before taking out his Bible, Jared went over the numbers. He was due some money for Superintendent’s wages from Flickman that would carry his personal expenses, and he’d mailed a copy of his contract to Fred Dent at the bank and gotten a fifty thousand dollar line of credit. The money was tight, but he figured he’d have enough to pay his men and keep his suppliers happy enough to keep things going.

“Mr. Burdon, could I have a word with you.” It was the desk manager from the Inn, a tall thin man with scuffed brown shoes and a shirt two sizes too big in the neck with a clip-on tie who made a habit of interrupting Jared’s morning coffee. “Your bill is almost a week overdue.”

“I’ll settle with you tonight. Right now I’ve got a lot to do.”

“We aren’t a charity, Mr. Berdun. If you can’t pay I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Look, I’m building a retirement home here. I’ll be here another eight or nine months and you will get paid for every minute I’m here. As empty as this lot is, I’d say I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to this RV Park, so like I said, I’ll be in to settle with you this evening.”

The dull light of the expansive room and the incessantly dreary cacophony of tunes pitched just right to entice just one more play, that's all, just one more, until the pockets are empty, emanated from the long rows of slot machines sporadically attended by slumped grey souls. The depressing room drove Jareb's eyelids a little further down as he sought the calm place within himself where he could withstand the growing pressure somewhere behind his eyeballs.

"It looks like you've got the jobsite humming right along," Flickman said between sips of his Margarita. Jareb had succumbed to the offer for lunch in town thinking that it might provide a better setting to ask about his superintendent's pay.

"It's going O.K.," Jareb replied, "but I'm worried about your plumber. He's a building behind on his underground work already. I've got a crew of framers showing up and I'm afraid we're going to overrun him."

"Larry will be O.K."

"What's he going to do when he has buildings to rough-in?"

"He'll have to hire more men, I guess."

Jareb decided to let it go. What he needed to talk about was money.

"You know, things have been pretty lean the last year and like I said, I've got a crew of men showing up Monday."

"Yeah?" Flickman responded, casually acknowledging the direction of the conversation.

"Things are kind of tight and I was wondering how often you pay?"

"Well, you put your draw in by the 25th and you'll get paid by the end of the next month."

"No, I mean my paycheck. As superintendent. When am I going to get paid?"

A practiced look of puzzlement came over Flickman's face. "You should have put a draw request in for that last week."

"A draw request?"

"Well, yeah. It's all part of your contract. I tell you what. Get it in to me tomorrow and I'll process it. You'll have your check by the end of the month.

"Part of my contract?" Jareb spat it out incredulously.

"That's the agreement we have, Jareb." Flickman's teeth gleamed past his grey-eyed smile.

"We agreed you'd pay me five thousand a month to run the job." Jareb blurted.

"That's right, and it's included in your contract."

"Not hardly! I can't work for free, Mr. Flickman. I've got bills to pay."

"You weren't close to the low bid on framing and finish work, Jareb. You've got plenty of money in your contract for running the job. We'll check your contract when we get back to the job shack, but I know that's the way it's written up. These Margaritas are good. Sure you don't want one?"

"No."

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I have another one."

"Look, I cut my number to the bone and then I took out a little more on account of the salary I'd be gettin' from you. There isn't any way I can get by without that salary. I'm gonna get kicked out of the RV Park if I don't give them some money tonight."

"Why don't you set your trailer up at the job? It'd be good to have someone watching the site at night."

Jareb poked at his brown-leafed salad and only took a few bites of the hamburger that had been hurriedly set in front of him by the dowdy

waitress dressed in white: white blouse, white skirt, white apron, white shoes with thick white crepe soles to ease the pain from miles walked going nowhere, a few quarters splashed on the table at a time. The green order pad in her apron pocket and the pencil stuck behind her ear were the only indications that she wasn't a nurse.

"How's everything?" she inquired through her bifocals.

"Just fine," the two men said perfunctorily in chorus, if not in harmony.

"Get your draw request in," Flickman said. "If you take the two percent discount I can have a check for you by the tenth. That's next Wednesday."

The cacophony of slot machines turned into a blaring crash of sound, like cymbals slamming together in his ears. The scraping of plates, the banging of the kitchen door, the cackle of conversation all intruded deep inside him, the pain shooting from behind his eyes down through his heart; he felt his scrotum tightening and withdrawing coldly within him. His vision blurred, and when they stepped out onto the street he lost his balance for a moment and reaching out to catch himself he was supported by Flickman's strong hand.

"Are you O.K., Jareb?" Flickman asked.

"Yeah, I'm O.K.," Jareb said. "I just lost my balance for a moment."

And straightening himself ramrod tall he looked out at the street through the tunnel of light and walked steadfastly toward his truck.

After work Jareb drove out highway 50 past tire shops, trailer parks and used car lots; decrepit strip malls filled with tanning booths, pay day loan offices, pizza restaurants and Christian bookstores to The Refuge Church of God which was housed in a converted warehouse behind Ray's Truck Stop and Cafe. He'd seen the flier on the light pole outside the Bonanza Inn: *How long has it been since God's light has poured out upon you?* it said.

These are the days of great need! Poverty, Pressure, Problems! God has the answer for you! Come to these meetings and receive your Miracle. THIS TIME IT WILL HAPPEN FOR YOU!! Below the words was the picture of Bishop Shahid Shahani who was visiting from Pakistan, a man touched by God's spirit who had travelled all this way to share his ministry with the good people of Fallon, and throughout the world, to *display God's love and power with signs and wonders of Divine Healing, Miracles, Deliverance and Salvation!*

The wooden front steps were wrapped in a primitive trellis cobbled together by the parishioners with materials scavenged from backyards and building sites. Walking through the door Jareb was greeted by two men who handed him a program and welcomed him to their church.

"He's an amazing man," they said, referring to Shahid Shahani. "He has already worked miracles in our lives and in our hearts!"

The congregation was in the middle of praise and worship. Two large speakers, one on each side of the room, filled the hall with music as the church pastors led the congregation in singing *Mighty To Save* from the stage, swaying and dancing to the song's pulsing beat. Jareb found a chair near the back and began singing. It was his favorite song and the spirit in the room, the familiar music and dancing, the reassuring presence of the pastors on the stage, moved him. The pain began to ease and the tunnel of light broadened to the full spectrum of God's wonder as the warmth of the spirit spread throughout his body. Soon he was arm in arm with men, women and children, rocking and swaying to the music. By the time Bishop Shahid Shahani began to speak he was an open vessel ready to take in God's message. He was battered but not beaten; the pressures of Satan were bearing down on him but he would not yield. Faith was all he needed. He

who believeth in Him shall be saved. The heat and the music and the dance brought a sweat to his brow. He moved fervently about the room. He was with his brothers and sisters; everything would be revealed. His knees were weak; he could barely support his head. The edges of his vision were blurred with dancing figures. Again he saw the tunnel of light, only this time it was a glow, like looking through a peep hole at the sun. Shashani's magnified face smiled upon him, a messenger from God; and then the hand reached out and the fire of angels rested on his forehead and he fell backward, barely conscious, into the waiting arms.

It was ten thirty before Jareb made it back to the RV Park, too late for the night manager to bother him. He disconnected the power, water and sewer; put all of his groceries, plates and glassware in a box on the floor, raised his jacks and hitched the trailer to his truck. With his headlights turned off he crept out of the Bonanza Inn and Casino RV Park. It was after midnight when he finally had the trailer leveled and blocked next to his job shack and crawled into bed. The navy jets roared through the night, keeping his patch of the world safe.

On Monday the first carpenters arrived. They snapped the lines on the slab and laid out the plates. Headers and trimmers were cut and studs spread out. Within a week his full crew was on site and buildings went up. The plumbers and electricians roughed them in, the insulators, drywallers and painters followed. Two carpenters fell back to do the finish work. By September the first building was finished and all but one was framed.

Jareb survived on coffee and oatmeal for breakfast and potatoes and onions purchased in bulk and shelled corn from the feed store for dinner. On Sunday's he'd mix some stew meat or ham hocks in with the corn chowder. He worked Saturdays but observed the Sabbath on Sunday,

attending services at the Christian Life Center. In the afternoon he usually took his fishing pole out to one of the reservoirs where he would lie on the bank with his hat pulled over his eyes, half awake and half asleep. He dreamed of the hayfields when he was a boy, driving the tractor that pulled the stone boat. His father, in a denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up, the blue vessels bulging on his thick forearms, thrust the hook into each bale as it went by and hoisted it onto the sled, while Shep trotted on behind, sniffing for mice at every turned bale. He could smell the hayfields of his youth; heavy and rich in the morning dew, then the dry crisp dust clogging his nostrils in the late afternoon. His world had been no bigger than those fields and the house and the small town with its school and church.

There was a rhythm to the years of his youth. The spring planting was followed by the fall harvest; work in the summer hayfields was followed by days in the classrooms of winter. Through all the seasons there were afternoon chores; feeding the animals, bringing in wood for the stove. And there was the steady cadence of ritual: Sunday morning church, then dinner at Grandma's. Watching his father he saw that all one needed to do to survive in the world was work, go to church, raise a family and be kind to your neighbors. The work was easy to find; all you needed to do was step out your back door.

Somehow the world had gotten off-kilter and the rules and rhythms of his earlier life had broken down. He retraced the past few years: the selling of the farm house; the move to town and the home on the golf course; the year without work; his life in Fallon, if you could call it that. He was so far from home and everything he had worked for his whole life. He wondered what he had accomplished. Perhaps it had all been nothing more than movement without purpose, just a series of events that seemed important at the time

but meant nothing. He thought of when Joshua and Joseph and Elisha were young; of summer days fishing along the river, of crisp fall days picking apples or throwing a football in the yard. Did it really happen? It seemed like a dream. He felt a longing for the old farmhouse, for Sunday dinner with roast beef, potatoes and gravy, three generations around the table. Somehow in the rush to improve, to provide a better life for his family, he had severed his roots and now he was drifting unbound and adrift. He was moored only by his faith; it anchored him through every storm. Storms pass, and this one would, too.

He is walking through the field. The billowy clouds float past the circle of sun. Shep licks his face and then trots off, his bushy tail wagging back and forth like a metronome. His father is on the tractor, tracing carefully the path of the windrow. Big green bales of hay plop out the back. When the tractor pulls along side him, his father pushes in the clutch and turns the key. He pulls off his gloves, tips his straw hat back and wipes his brow with his shirtsleeve.

“Hot one today,” he said. “I sure could use some lemonade.”

He hands his father the glass, wet and cool in his hand.

“Sometimes it seems like I’ve spent half my life going around in circles,” his father says. “I bet I’ve travelled a million miles and never left the farm.”

He floats up into the sky and watches his father. He can see the pattern of the field, the windrows like an endless spiral. The tractor creeps along. His father looks over his shoulder, watching the windrow disappear into the machine. The row goes on forever, spiraling into eternity.

The old man scuffled down the corridor, slowly sliding one slippered foot ahead, then the other, each slide forward a Sisyphean effort. A fat, worn woman walked tediously beside him speaking words of encouragement with each scuffle. “That’s good, Dad,” she’d say. “You’re making real progress today.” A younger man, the woman’s son, was on the other side of him, carrying the burden of his grandfather’s weight, almost dragging the old man along while he pulled the IV pole along with his other hand, careful to keep the many tubes and wires propelling liquids into and out of the moving cadaver-like figure while monitoring the beating heart within. The green light blinked at a steady pace. What did it feel, that heart, Jareb wondered? Could it remember the rush of passion at the first kiss? The overwhelming flood of emotion at the emergence of the first born? Was it the beating heart hoping for one more moment of desire that drove him, or was it just the habit of effort; or worse, obligation? Did he want to live, or did he feel guilty for dying?

It seemed like an hour had passed by the time the three of them made it to the end of the hallway. “Let’s stop and look out the window, Grandpa,” the young man said. “Look, the sun is shining.” As if it made any difference to the old man, Jareb thought. What was there to look out on, anyway? Rows of bungalows with dried up lawns and broken down cars in the street out front; the steady stop and start of traffic on Twelfth Avenue, the cars enroute to or from Wal-Mart, Albertson’s, MacDonald’s or some other iconic destination, their drivers hoping for a moment of satisfaction, a respite from the drudgery, as promised on television, the computer, the Sunday paper shopping section, the radio. Was it enough to keep one from dying, that view?

“I got yers black.” It was Bernice’s sister Betty, handing him the coffee before she sat on the upholstered bench, one leg crossed over the other, her foot shaking annoyingly while her leg bobbed up and down. “Look at that old man,” she whispered. “He looks dead already.”

He’d been lying in the dark in his trailer tucked between the job shack and the lumber pile, startled awake by the sudden roar of the Navy jets which, no matter how many times he heard them, always sent a jolt of adrenaline coursing through his body making sleep impossible.

“You got to come home right now, Jareb!” was what she’d said without explanation, her voice full of panic as it usually was.

“What’s the matter?” Jareb asked. “Whatever it is, can’t it wait a couple of days until the weekend?”

“No it can’t wait, Jareb. It’s that damned lump she never told you about ‘cause you wouldn’t listen anyways. Probably just say something stupid like ‘trust in the Lord.’ Course, what else could you say cause you haven’t got any health insurance on account of you wouldn’t take that bridge job. She told me not to call you, said you had enough to deal with without worrying ‘bout her, poor thing. But comes a time you just got to pay attention. You can’t go through your whole life denying ever’ thing just so’s you can keep things straight in yer own mind. Sometimes there’s life to deal with whether you want to or not, so I called you anyways.”

“What in heck you talkin’ ‘bout Betty? You aren’t makin’ a bit of sense.”

“I’m talkin’ about life, Jareb, Bernice’s life and what she has to do to save it. Course, they aren’t any good to her anymore anyhow, what with her kids all growed up and her too old to have anymore even if’n she wanted ‘em. But still it’s hard, losin’ the best part of herself, or what the boys all liked if you could call that the best part. You better stand by her, by God. Don’t go

runnin' off after the first pair that walks by. She's stood by you through thick and thin all these years and it's been mostly thin lately, so it's time for you to ante up, by God. You better get yer ass up here in a hurry because they're comin' off at three o'clock this afternoon and she needs someone to tell her that he's still gonna love her. You hear me?"

He never did like Betty. She was like a suppurating sore doused in alcohol. Some people could drink and not let it interfere with their lives, but not Betty. Whenever things went bad for her she'd spend a few weeks in the bottle, calling Bernice every night to cry over her woes, all of which she brought on herself. She'd been through five husbands and auditioned at least five others, but nothing ever stuck with her, except the drama. You could always count on plenty of that with Betty.

"Hold on a minute and just tell me what the heck is going on. I haven't got a clue what you're talking about."

"To put it bluntly, I'm talkin' 'bout yer wife's tits. They're takin' 'em off today so's they can save her life. Is that plain enough for you, Jareb?"

"What the, Betty, have you been drinking, 'cause I'm about to hang up."

"Who the hell wouldn't be drinkin' at a time like this, 'cept Mr. Pure and Perfect. Yeah, I've been nippin', but that doesn't change the fact that Bernice has cancer and she's fightin' for her life and her husband is down in Nevada 'cause he's too damn good to work on the interstate and collect the insurance that would have saved her. Like I said, you better get up here in a hurry."

"Are you serious, Betty? Has she really got cancer?"

"What the heck you think I been tellin' you? You think I called at four in the morning 'cause I wanted to chat? This is a goddamn emergency!"

“And they’re really operating on her today?”

“At three-thirty this afternoon, the poor sweetheart.”

“Seriously?”

“As God is my witness.”

“How long has she known? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“You men are all alike: don’t wanta hear nothin’ till it’s too damn late. Then it’s all, ‘Why didn’t no one tell me?’ Cause yer all too wrapped up in yer own needs, Jareb. All of you. You wake up at the eleventh hour an’ then try to fix everything instead of just being there for us. Try listening once. You’d be surprised what you might hear. Try being a woman for a day, hell for an hour! You’ll find out what listening is all about. You listen good enough an’ yer heart starts to hurt, Everyone’s got pain, Jareb, an’ if you listen you take it all in, all the pain. God I wish I was a man sometimes, so I could just talk about my own problems and not feel so much. But right now you got to stop thinkin’ ‘bout yerself and for once start thinkin’ ‘bout Bernice ‘cause if she ever needed you, now’s the time. So are you comin’ up or not?”

“Could I talk to Bernice?”

“Are you kiddin’? It’s the middle of the night. She’s hardly slept for a week she’s been so worried, now you want me to wake her up so you can say what? Yer sorry? I’ll say yer sorry, a sorry son of a bitch is what you are. But yer all she’s got and she needs you, so are you comin’?”

He took the coffee, cupping it in both hands to warm the chill which rippled though his body in spite of the carefully regulated hospital temperature. His day had begun with the jolting roar of the jets followed by Betty’s jagged message and, after several cups of coffee waiting for the

hands of the clock to arrive at a suitable position for the necessary phone calls to Clay and a few of the subcontractors, the monotonous drive through the desert that pushed him deeper into that suspended state of consciousness where reality and dream blend into the soup of disquietude. He sensed that he was not in control. It was as if he was in quick sand, irrevocably sinking. Life was closing in on him and he couldn't see the way out. He had been patient throughout his tribulations; he had been constant in his prayers and steady in his faith and yet the light would not shine on him. He felt as though something strange was happening to him. He was scuffling along, as weak and uncertain as the old man. The chill filled his cerebellum and radiated down through his spine and into his core.

He sat on the navy blue bench in the antiseptic corridor where the blue terrazzo floor met the mustard yellow wall waiting for life to tell him what comes next. Somewhere in the bowels of the hospital Bernice lay unconscious with doctors hovered over her body, scalpels in hand, her chest carved and bloody and vacant.

Betty read magazines to pass the time, crossing one leg, then the other, a foot always shaking or twitching. Occasionally she'd take the elevator downstairs and walk around to the side of the hospital where the smoking section was, then return to take up her magazine again. Jareb sat in a stupor, occasionally noticing the nurses behind the counter, the orderlies and janitors moving from room to room in their color coded uniforms, white and turquoise and pale yellow and green. They were all silently busy, their affairs a mystery to the civilians who waited equally silently, whispering as they sat on the chairs and benches judiciously clustered along the corridors to provide some dignity for the families who waited nervously for the doctors' pronouncements of God's will.

The scuffling old man was supplanted by patients in various stages of ill health, some with an apparent futures, others not. Jareb tried to pick out the ones who would live. It was difficult to tell; cancer can be deceiving: in remission now, everyone smiling and laughing like they've won the lottery, then in an instant the trap door opens plunging them back to despair. Some looked almost vigorous, strolling down the corridor with the ubiquitous IV pole in tow, flashing lights sending signals tracking the hidden workings of the organism we call ourselves to the station where nurses monitored progress or deterioration with expressionless professionalism.

This was their new reality: the cutting and probing and monitoring, the doubt and the fear punctuated with moments of hope and tears and utter despair. In a day or two he would be trudging down the hallway towing the pole with the fluids and wires that kept Bernice alive, speaking the same words of encouragement that all the others spoke.

And there was also this: he had no money to pay for any of this. He wondered what it all would cost: fifty thousand dollars? A hundred? He hadn't made a house payment in months, and now this. He could eat potatoes and onions till the cows come home and it wouldn't make a dent in Bernice's bill. The hospital administrator had set up an appointment with him for the next morning to establish a payment plan. What was he supposed to say? He wasn't some deadbeat, some drugged up welfare case. He could pick them out, their slovenly children slouching and sprawling on the benches, the ones who'd never worked a day in their life, had never seen the inside of a church. They were the ones pulling everything down; they were the burden good people were forced to carry. He wasn't like them. He'd worked hard all his life and paid his way. He'd pay the hospital every last cent or his name wasn't Jareb Berdun. But they'd have to be patient.

“I think that’s her, the poor thing.” Betty jumped up as the gurney came through the double doors at the end of the corridor. It was attended by two men and a woman, all dressed in scrubs. As they pulled along side Betty and Jareb one of the men, pulling his mask up on his head stopped to speak to them. His dark, earnest eyes were assured and steady as he told them that everything had gone well.

“We are doing an axillary node dissection to determine the proper treatment protocol, but in cases like this you can typically expect four rounds of cytoxan and taxotere followed up with radiation therapy. Right now she needs rest. You can stay in the room with her for a few minutes, then I suggest that you go home and try to relax. She’s in good hands here, getting the very best care.”

Jareb noticed how young the doctor looked; he couldn’t be much older than Joshua. To him Bernice was just a body that needed the repairs he had been trained to do; it wasn’t much different than taking his truck to the mechanic, except that his truck didn’t breathe and eat, it wasn’t a mother and a wife full of memories and feelings and hopes. A truck, or a body, wasn’t tied by the weft of love and experience, anger, sorrow and joy to the warp of husband, children and community. A body is just a thing, but the flesh beneath the folds of cloth before him carried within its wounds everything he was, everything he had ever been and everything he ever would be. The nascent intertwining had begun long ago in the back seat along the river, the force flowing willfully through her flesh into the form of their children and out into the world until Jareb’s whole existence was encompassed within the veil of her being.

He followed the doctor and nurses into the room where Bernice was lifted into the bed. Betty hovered over one side of the bed with Jareb standing

numb beside her as the nurse transferred the bags of fluid from the gurney to the rack at the head of the bed and transferred the wires, plugging them into the monitoring systems that flashed and blinked. When all of the vital connections were made the nurse pulled the curtain around the bed shielding them from the other two patients in the room. Jareb sat in the chair opposite Betty, next to the blinking lights.

“She looks so weak and frail, poor thing,” Betty said softly, summoning up the maternal caring that she had so rarely exhibited throughout the years, as she held the sleeping Bernice’s hand. “The worst is over now. She just needs some rest and love, that’s all we can do.”

Bernice ruffled softly in her sleep, her head tilted toward Betty. Her face was bloated; her sagging cheeks and thin lips below purple eyelids and dark baggy eyes, the impression of the lacerative insult hidden by bandages, gowns and sheets, were motionless. The subtle rising and falling of the bed covers was the only sign that she was still present. She had withdrawn to a sacred place far from worry, the place where she had always been in one way or another as her pure self, unburdened. Jareb almost envied her, thought for a moment how good it would be to be in that bed, relieved of dealing with Flickman, the mortgage company and hospital bill collectors; helpless and in need, cared for, loved, the family gathered around him, the center of attention, with doctors, nurses and orderlies focused on him, telling him to let his worries go. “Rest is what you need,” they’d say. “Think of nothing; resting is your job now,” they’d say, as he receded into the promise of himself once felt, long ago it seemed to him, now, sitting by the blinking monitors. In his youth, perhaps, when he still seemed like a possibility, when he still believed that life would unfold around him to a purpose and he would be fully revealed, whole and complete as the perfect

manifestation of the self he knew himself to be. Wasn't that the purpose of the struggle? To become whole in the world? To be? Isn't that what he and Bernice had worked for all these years? Somehow that state of acceptance was always just beyond their reach, just a little further down the road, just around the next bend. Now Bernice might die. He could die. People do die, all the time: walking across the street, in their sleep, driving to work, in the bathroom. There would be no moment of recognition, just a series of moments. And then death.

No, it couldn't be true. Hadn't they devoted their lives to Him? Weren't they supposed to reap God's bounty on earth? For more than twenty years they moved forward in devotion to Him, working hard and giving a tenth to the Lord, and offerings, too, in the good times. And each year the Lord had been more generous and loving, rewarding them with healthy children and financial blessings. His business had flourished through his righteous faith. They were moving forward in the glory of God. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Beyond the blue curtain the rasping hiss of breathing was punctuated by a rolling mucosal cough, building like a steam engine to the phlegmatic climax and then the mournful expectorating sigh. The muffled tones of a familiar voice wafted softly through the enclosure: "Do you want to pick window 'A' or window 'B'," as the hushed anticipation of the unseen audience announced the excitement of the moment. "I'll pick window 'B', Drew," declares the confident contestant amid the groaning disappointment of the crowd.

"Elisha, you have to come home."

“No I don’t.” She was the youngest child, stubborn and used to getting what she wanted.

“Your mother needs you, Elisha. I’ve already bought your bus ticket, so there’s no use in arguing.”

“But Dad, I only have a few months of school left. I’ll be able to get a job and earn my own money. I don’t want to end up like Mom.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying there’s something wrong with your mother, that she isn’t good enough?”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying I want my life to be different. I don’t want to be dependent on someone else.”

“So now I’m not good enough. Haven’t I taken care of all of you all these years?”

“That’s just it, Dad. You always took care of Mom, which meant that you got to make all the decisions and she had to take whatever you gave her.”

“And that wasn’t good enough? Now you look here, Elisha...”

“Like having to keep quiet about her pain the past year. Oh, you think this happened all at once, her getting sick and having surgery, but there’s a lot you don’t know; there always has been because you only see what you want to see. But Mom’s always had to see it all, take in all the hurt and sorrow without ever saying a word about it. To you, anyhow. She’s been telling me how she hurt since last spring. I kept telling her to go get it checked out but she said that she didn’t want to worry you, that she didn’t have any money to pay a doctor anyhow, so she didn’t go and now look at her.”

“So this is my fault?”

“I’m just saying I want to be able to take care of myself.”

“That’s not the way it’s supposed to be, Elisha. We raised you in the church; you should know better.”

“Dad, I’ll come home, but just for a few days. Then I’m coming back and finishing school.”

“Let her finish her classes, Jareb. It’s her time in life; let her have it. Why does it always have to be the girl? What about Josh or Joe? I’ll bet you never even thought about asking them. They’re boys, after all”

“For one thing, Joe’s in Camp Leatherneck fightin’ off the Taliban. You think Elisha wants to trade places with him? And Josh can’t hardly quit his job at the sugar factory to take care of his mom when he’s got his own family to provide for.” Jareb could hear the pitch of his voice raising with exasperation and anger.

“Well then I’ll have to stay and take care of her, seeing as how you won’t.”

The pupils in Betty’s eyes were thin black dots of accusation. She couldn’t keep her nose in her own business, or didn’t want to, having made a foul mess of it. Jareb thought of the calls he’d be making home, hoping to touch that ribbon of meaning that secured his existence, only to hear Betty’s alcoholic utterances slung at him like spears from unexpected angles, the darkness of her vision bearing occasional truths that made her assaults all the more painful.

“Elisha is family. We take care of our own,” Jareb retorted.

“And what am I? Chopped liver? I’ll have you know she’s been my sister a whole lot longer than she’s been your wife. I changed her diapers for god’s sake. I fed her her bottle. I took care of her when she was a baby and I can take care of her now. Let Elisha live her life for god’s sake. You don’t want

to see her end up trapped in her own house, all alone and too poor to go to a doctor do you? Well do you?"

Jareb stumbled out the door, evading the storm within the house he could no longer bear to enter. It had become the repository of his pain, a symbol of his lost promise. Where had it gone, and why? He remembered the day, just three years ago, when he had lifted Bernice in his arms and stepped across the threshold. It was the crowning moment of their life, a step into a better world far from the chores of the farm. Gone was the screech and slap of the screen door, the muddy overalls and boots on the back porch. No more pink and gray linoleum; no more green formica edged in chrome. They had moved into a world of hardwood and travertine and slab granite. They were reaping God's bounty on earth, or so they thought. Now he had nowhere to go. There was no escape from his misery. In the house lay his lacerated wife, guarded by her corrosive sister. Grabbing a shovel and spade from the garage, he walked across the street to the garden patch he had planted that spring.

* * *

The asphalt cut mercilessly straight through the high mountain desert parting the sage while cresting true over the mounding slopes and straddling bench lands, the swirling waves of heat a blurry vision above its blackened path. The landscape was unyielding, save the distant white ridge line of Steen's Mountain, rising like a snow capped Spinosaurus in the West. The pickup raced along the black string through the barren land, hurrying from one point to another, not spiraling in an endless rhythm but

rushing along a trajectory with an apparent beginning and end, a progression. It sped as relentlessly forward as the highway, disregarding the life fabric on which the road was laid; it was not a part of the setting, not even an intruder; it was just a machine transporting its occupant from one time and place to another. It was not a part of life but an interlude, suspended in time, travelling through irrelevant space. Until it stopped: *Big Antelope Canyon, 64 miles* the sign said.

The truck idled, a momentary hesitation in its mission, and then turned onto the two tracks slowly bouncing its way through the sage and juniper and up through the notch in the mountains. One canyon was followed by another as the primitive road wound around and over the barren range and then delivered the truck onto a remote high desert plain endlessly devoid of all life save for the sparsely determined grasses poking up from the blackened earth. The flat plain made for a smooth roadway, if you can call two tracks never travelled a roadway, and the truck gathered speed, shooting a billowy rooster tail of dust tracing across the desert like the trailing cloud of a plane on a similarly magical path through the sky. For the better part of an hour the dust rose as gracefully as a fluttering sheet thrown over a bed, rising in a rush and floating back to earth, until the tracks came to an abrupt end and the earth opened into a chasm as if it had been torn apart. The reddish brown rock, fissured and broken into spires as sacred as any steeple, dropped straight down for two thousand feet, the protruding buttresses of rock lined up like the hunched torsos of the Magi contemplating the moment of the stars, their wind-worn shoulders reflecting the late afternoon light while their knees were obscured in the shadow of the canyon below. Deep in the abyss a ribbon of water, cool and innocent in its flow, traced its way gently through the gorge carrying each

droplet from the high peaks to the sea, only to have them sent back again in a timeless cycle. Cut deep into the desert floor, it carried life. Its flanks were a rush of green grasses accented by the seductive paint of lupine, lilies and columbine. There were even a few trees, an aspen grove it looked like, grouped like a gaggle of spinsters in a backwater. For millions of years the stream had traced its course; at first over the hardened rock of the plain. Then, after eons of calm movement toward its purpose, receiving the heavens' sacrament and delivering it to the sea, it had carved its being deep into the face of the earth. There was no question of it; it is.

Jareb looked out over the chasm and saw the deep wet darkness below the sunlit shadowed rock timelessly carrying the measure of life to its destiny. He had expected something different, a moment of recognition perhaps; a revelation. But there was nothing, just the timeless movement of water and wind. Nothing else.